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Bradford M.I.

L A Y I N G

THE FOUNDATION STONE

OF THE

MECHANICS' HALL.

In fulfilment of public announcement, the foundation stone of the Hall of the Mechanic's Institute was laid on Monday, the 1st of April, by the President, the Rev. Jas. Acworth, M.A. The day was exceedingly cold, and probably on that account, the attendance was restricted: certainly there were not so many present as was expected. Beneath the stone a copper-box, firmly secured and soldered, so as to exclude both the air and the damp, was placed, containing—

1939

A copy of the Rules of the Institution as first published.

A copy of the Rules as they now stand, together with a Catalogue and Supplement of the Books in the Library.

A copy of each Report published since the establishment of the Society.

A copy of the President's Inaugural Address.

A copy of all the Circulars issued by the Committee on the subject of the Building, the Instructions given to the Architects on advertising for Plans, the Bill announcing the time of laying the foundation stone; as also the lithographed Plan issued in 1837, together with copies of several of the Subscription Cards, Member and Life Member's Tickets, &c.

A List of all the Contributors to the Building Fund, together with a List upon parchment of the above documents.

Silver and Copper Coins of her present Majesty's reign, issued and bearing date, 1839, amongst which were Silver Penny, Twopenny, Threepenny, and Fourpennypieces.

Autograph Letters to the Secretaries were also enclosed from the present Members for the Borough and West Riding.

Over the box was placed a brass plate, with a suitable inscription, which was read by the Senior Secretary.

This first Stone
of a Building, to be called
The Hall of the Bradford Mechanics' Institute,
raised by the
Voluntary Subscriptions of its Members and Friends,
and devoted for ever to the promotion of
Philosophy and Literature,
was laid by
The Rev. JAMES ACWORTH, M.A.,
on the 1st day of April,
one thousand eight hundred and thirty-nine.

The President then went through the usual formalities of laying the first stone; and then, ascending a slight mound, delivered the following eloquent and appropriate oration:

FELLOW MEMBERS OF THE MECHANICS' INSTITUTE,—
We are at length in a position to felicitate one another. No room for doubt as to the practicability of our long cherished wishes now remains. In the ceremony and proceedings of this day, we obtain the earnest of our soon being in possession of a fixed permanent abode. Some of you, I am aware, have at times been ready to charge the Directors of the Institute with remissness for not having taken the present step earlier; and others, it may be, have been disposed to relinquish the expectation of its being taken at all. Each of these parties will, I trust, now be satisfied of the honest desire of the Officers, whom year after year they have entrusted with the superintendence of their concerns, to carry their wishes into effect, and that nothing has prevented them from doing so, but the existence of hindrances, which it was not in their power to remove. An edifice of some kind, it is true, might have been long since run up; but would it have answered the purposes of the Institute, or would it have corresponded with the just requirements of those, who had contributed most liberally to its erection? It has ever been felt, Gentlemen, by your successive committees, that while everything approaching to mere superfluity and show should be most scrupulously avoided, the building reared ought to be adequate to the uses, for which it was raised, and moreover not discredit the town, in which it was erected. Till now, these conditions could not, owing to a want of pecuniary means, be met; whereas, in the structure of which we have assembled this day to lay the first stone, they will, it is confidently believed, be strictly fulfilled. Judging from the drawings, the structure will not be inferior in appearance to any of those around it, while the conveniences it will contain will be commensurate with the exigencies of the Institute, even after

it has become what, it is presumed, it will be, when occupying its own domicile. One part of the plan, as delineated on paper, and as originally adopted by the Committee, must indeed, in consequence of a deficiency still of finances, be left unexecuted. I refer to the Museum and to private apartments for the Curator, and Librarian. Enough, however, will be finished to enable the Institute to move on in its prescribed course with freedom and ease. For instance, there will be separate Rooms for the different classes engaged in literary or scientific pursuits, a spacious Library, and an admirable Lecture Room. The first mentioned suite of apartments, will, it is hoped, be well filled with ingenuous youth, eager, under the direction of competent masters, to store their minds with useful knowledge, and more especially with those portions of it, bearing on the different departments of industry, in which they are, or are likely to be employed. The library, besides embracing the books already belonging to the Institute, and as many more as its own funds may enable it from time to time to purchase, will, there can be but little doubt, be continually receiving valuable accessions from generous individuals, who know the importance of creating a taste for reading in the minds of the great mass of the community, and of suitably nourishing it, when created. And the lecture room, it may surely be expected, will be the scene of many a hard won triumph, achieved by indomitable genius in working its way through seemingly invincible difficulties. From its chair there will stream forth not only the profound lucubrations, and elaborately constructed essays of the more favoured disciples of science and art, reared up in cloisters and surrounded by every facility and appliance for improvement, but the no less fruitful speculations and discoveries of the self-taught, fostered, as its own children, by the Institute itself, and supplied by it with whatever aids to cultivation their circumstances enabled them to appropriate. Now supposing, Gentlemen, that these anticipated results should be realised, and surely there is nothing visionary or extravagant in the anticipation of them, who will say that the present measure is not amply justified, or that the expense, the anxiety and trouble involved in accomplishing it, are not abundantly compensated? Where, I would ask, is the individual laying the slightest claim to patriotism or philanthropy, who would not vastly prefer seeing his fellow-creatures, even in the humblest walks of life, devoting what little leisure they can abstract from unavoidable physical toil, to the culture of their understandings, to finding them waste it, together with their health, and no small share of their hard earnings, in the haunts of intemperance, dissipation,

pation, obscenity, and vice? The Institute, it is true, does not undertake to inculcate doctrines, immediately associated with man's highest welfare; nor does it allow of the introduction of matters confessedly polemical, in either theology or politics, in its meetings for mutual instruction and improvement. Knowing that there are places already appropriated to the discussion and enforcement of such topics, and finding, also, that controversy, however necessary to the overthrow of error and the establishment of truth, has almost invariably the injurious effect of estranging the parties waging it from one another, it restricts itself to those pursuits which exhibit no exclusive pretensions, interfere with no separate interests, and moreover serve, by their meliorating influence, to make men regard one another with candid and benignant feelings. It aims to habituate the mind to mark, compare, and judge—to lead it into an acquaintance with the wondrous phenomena of the external universe, and the still more marvellous and inexplicable phenomena of the universe which itself comprises—to enable it to subordinate whatever is material to its own control and use—to teach it to look on happiness as springing rather from a proper government of the appetites and passions, than from any combination of circumstances, however agreeable, and to demean itself accordingly. Without prescribing any particular set of religious dogmas, or any particular system of political opinions, it endeavours to qualify its disciples to think for themselves, by accustoming them to trace the manifestations of design, so conspicuously visible in the works of nature, and refer them to their true source; to note with heedful attention the changes, which empires and communities have in different periods of the world's history undergone, and investigate the causes which have produced them; to observe the innumerable ties, of greater or less intimacy and force, by which all beings, rational and irrational, are connected together, and the consequent duty of studying the welfare of others as well as their own; to mark the springs of genuine contentment and peace, and abide by them; and thus in connexion with confessedly higher and more effectual agencies, to render those who come under its fostering care sincere Christians, useful members of the body politic, commendable constituents of the households or families to which they severally belong, and in all respects what, as intelligent and immortal creatures, they ought to be. If, Gentlemen, I should be thought by any to be ascribing too much to the operations and influence of Mechanics' Institutes, I would appeal, for the correctness of my representation, to the character of not a few of the works found

in the library of our own, and also to the matter, and still more the spirit, of some at least of the lectures delivered before our own. It is with lively satisfaction I here avail myself of the opportunity of pointedly referring to those which were not long since given by my excellent Friend the Rev. W. Scott, one of your vice-presidents, on Self-Cultivation; lectures fraught with the most precious lessons of practical wisdom and experience; and lectures to which, I am satisfied, no one, whether young or old, attentively listened, without pleasure and advantage. I would further appeal to the close and almost indissoluble connexion subsisting between the different branches of knowledge and truth, so that it is scarcely possible to be familiar with one, and not become in some measure acquainted with the rest. At the same time, I readily concede that the results just sketched may not be realized in all cases. Some, perhaps not a few, of the Associates of this Institute may fail to become what it proposes to render them, and what their best friends desire them to be. Here and there, one and another may, by a strange perversion of their faculties, and of the intended means of improving them, settle down into absolute scepticism. But what then? Is it nothing that the remainder, constituting, as I verily believe, by far the majority, exhibit the elevating influence of the process through which they have passed, in a superior discharge of the various duties, social, domestic, and personal, devolving upon them; or that even these repulsive abortions are not so hideous or hurtful as they would otherwise have been? Persuaded, Gentlemen, as I am most firmly, of the intimate alliance between principles and practice, I am nevertheless of opinion, that the worst principles may be so modified by other principles of a very different character, or so controlled by feelings, which perhaps in this case I should denominate instinctive or indigenous, as to be prevented from working out their natural tendency; and hence I can conceive of a well-tutored Atheist (if you will tolerate the paradox which such a collocation of terms certainly seems to involve), proving on the whole a better member of society than the ignorant, untractable, reckless Believer, who has no other claim to be regarded as a believer but the bare name. Be this, however, as it may, there will always be a fair proportion in whom the Institute obtains, to a greater or less extent, its contemplated ends; and why, then, should it not be warmly patronized and vigorously sustained by all really or professedly solicitous for the advancement of truth, and order, and peace? I do not conceal from myself, nor do I seek to conceal from others, that by its efforts, and those of kindred establishments, the

humbler classes may ere long emulate the existing attainments of the 'classes above them. But is there aught in this circumstance to awaken jealousy, or produce chagrin? One would rather conclude, that a true-hearted philanthropist must rejoice in the incentive thus applied to the higher classes, to move on in the path of intellectual and moral excellence. Or are we to suppose that there is an aristocracy of mind, as well as of station and wealth? For my own part, assured that the latter will never without their own egregious and obstinate folly, lose one iota of the deference to which they are legitimately entitled, I am gratified and thankful to perceive that the idea of the former is very generally exploded, and that men every where are beginning to assert their native, indestructible independence of thought and action. Allowing it possible to retain the great mass of the community in blind unquestioning ignorance, who would choose to incur the tremendous guilt of doing so? Or by what species of excuse would he strive to palliate his offence? Would he dare to allude to the danger into which the alleged privileges of his order, or the assumed rights of his station would be brought by the unrestricted dissemination of knowledge? Could a more convincing proof be given of the monstrous injustice of those privileges, or the utter illegality of those rights, than what such an allusion would supply? And who, possessed of one spark of genuine humanity, would not unhesitatingly exclaim, Perish and be for ever annihilated all such selfish assumptions, rather than those whom they so coldly regard, not to say contemptuously scowl on, constituting, as they do, by far the larger proportion of mankind, cast in the same mould, and formed of the same materials as their superiors, should remain in a condition, which inevitably precludes them not only from attaining, but even from comprehending, or so much as inquiring after the prime and all-important end of their existence. To stay, however, the diffusion of knowledge is, whether happily or unhappily, no longer practicable. A Power of inconceivable might is now at work which, will sooner or later unlock the very last fetter of ignorance, and send forth the disenthralled spirit to expatiate over the immeasurable territories of universal science. The capability of reading is being very generally created. Books on nearly every imaginable topic of interest are being multiplied to an incredible extent. By the vast improvements introduced of late into mechanical processes, the opportunity of possessing them is placed within the reach of all, save the absolutely indigent and destitute. It is, indeed, one of the most extraordinary phenomena of our age, abounding as

it does in what is strange and surprising, that the first-rate productions of literary genius, which only a few years since could be purchased by none but those in easy circumstances, may now be procured for comparatively the merest trifle. Libraries of even considerable variety and extent are no longer, in a pecuniary sense, treasures. And who can say that what must have seemed only ten or fifteen years ago incredibly cheap, may not, by yet further improvements in manufacture, become cheaper still? To stop, therefore, the spread of intellectual light is impossible—as impossible as to stay the Source of natural light, moving on uninteruptedly, majestically, and with ever increasing effulgence, towards its noontide glories. And the only point, consequently, for consideration is, how to prevent the mind from abusing its newly-acquired freedom, and thus converting what should be, and was calculated to be a blessing into a curse? And can this, I ask, Gentlemen, be done more effectually than by training it to think dispassionately, patiently, and severely; to distinguish things which differ, and not dissociate those which are alike; to refer effects to their true causes, and not ascribe to causes more than they actually produce; to hold the judgment in suspense when evidence is insufficient or conflicting, and not be precipitate in drawing conclusions, or imputing motives. With the mind thus disciplined, truth will have nothing to fear; all that is really valuable in the existing institutions and usages of Society will be perfectly safe; only that which is palpably injurious, and confessedly untenable will be swept away. The sinister designs of a guilty ambition will be frustrated, and the sordid calculations of an all-absorbing selfishness be disappointed, but veracity, mutual confidence, and universal good-will will be maintained, purified, and enlarged. Now, this training of the mind, and these wholesome fruits as consequent upon it, are exactly the good, at which Mechanics' Institutes aim, and which, as their patrons and supporters honestly aver, they are fitted to produce. Nevertheless, there are some so prejudiced, and, I had almost said wilfully prejudiced, as to impute to them, and to similar agencies, the discontent, the agitation, and turbulence, by which certain portions of society are now pervaded and kept in unnatural motion. Admitting the existence of these evils to the full extent contended for, it is, I assert, a gross libel on the Author of human nature, to ascribe them to the diffusion of knowledge, or to those Associations whose sole business is the diffusion of it in its most healthy and pure state. Those who are found in our ranks, are, I will venture to affirm, speaking of them generally, among the best conser-

vators of the peace, and the truest subjects of the realm. Few of them, comparatively, are seen in the arena of political strife, in the train of the factious demagogue, or in the company of the profligate and vicious, be they noble or ignoble, wealthy or poor. They constitute, as all who really know them must admit, some of the firmest supports, and most graceful ornaments, of the social fabric. Hence I cannot but feel it imperative on me, as a citizen, as a philanthropist, and still more as a Christian, (and in thus speaking I know I am merely giving utterance to the feeling of those around me,) to lend what little ability or influence I may happen to possess, to the furtherance of the interests of so valuable an instrument of good. Anxious to find the different classes of my fellow-townsmen working in harmonious co-operation for the well-being of each and of all, I must support it; and here with all respect, though at the same time with all earnestness, I would call on them to do the same; the rich by giving to it their countenance and pecuniary assistance; the poor by enrolling themselves among its members, and appropriating its benefits. It has been already intimated by our local journal, as well as through other media, that notwithstanding every effort of the secretaries and of the committee, both individually and collectively, to obtain contributions, there will be a heavy debt on the building. Our trust, however, is, gentlemen, that the possessors of affluence will not suffer the operations of the Institute to be impeded, or embarrassed by it; and that they, for whose advantage especially the building itself and all its appliances exist, will show an eagerness to profit by them. Thus sustained and encouraged, the Institution will, I am persuaded, prove a moral blessing to the town in which it is located, and to which in truth it ought to be considered as belonging; counteracting vice and fostering virtue; cementing together, and making one the different grades of the community; diffusing through the whole a spirit of sympathy, mutual dependence, kindliness, order, and peace; and thus, in subservience to the yet more direct and powerful agency of our common Christianity, preparing all for the world beyond the grave. (Cheers.)

The assembly immediately afterwards separated.